

Faith Like a Child Luke 17:1-10

Rev. Brett Shoemaker ~ March 7, 2019 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

¹ Jesus said to his disciples, “Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! ² It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble. ³ Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. ⁴ And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive.”

⁵ The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” ⁶ The Lord replied, “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.

⁷ “Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, ‘Come here at once and take your place at the table?’ ⁸ Would you not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink?’ ⁹ Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? ¹⁰ So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, ‘We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!’”

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

We have spent a lot of time working our way through the book of Luke together this year, with only a couple short breaks. Although it has been tempting, we’ve left nothing out. One of the values in doing this is that we begin to develop an attitude of taking all Scripture as it comes to us—instead of deciding ahead of time what we should pay attention to, and what we should ignore.

Another value of reading straight through, especially in Luke, is that it becomes clear that God is intimately involved in our lives. Perhaps, this

should be obvious because it is Jesus’ story, the story of God breaking into restore the world. But, we’re reminded in this passage that God is not only involved. God relentlessly pursues us. From our earliest moments of childhood, God wants us to know Him. Right through the struggles of life that are inevitable, God is there. He’ll chase us down if he needs to.

I was reminded of an old movie from the 1970’s, one of the early movies that Steven Spielberg directed, called *The Duel*. I saw it for the first time not long after I got my license, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to get behind the wheel again. This ordinary business man is traveling through some lonely desert highways of California in his red Plymouth Valiant and is for some reason targeted by this large old oil tanker semi-truck. At first it just seems like he’s got rude manners on the road, but it quickly escalates into a fight for his life as this truck just keeps showing up every time he thinks he’s succeeded in losing it. For the entire movie, you never see the face of the driver. It’s horrifying!

Such a feeling of helplessness and fear! Is there anything worse than being relentlessly pursued for the wrong the reasons?

On the other hand, is there any better feeling than being sought after, to be pursued by another for the right reasons? To be simply wanted by others for our work gives us confidence. To be desired by a child when you walk in the door is such an intense joy. To be pursued by another for a relationship of love can be anything from flattering to life-changing.

Being pursued brings purpose. It brings joy. It brings belonging.

The God of the universe, the Alpha and the Omega, creator of all that is and will be, chases after us, pursuing us with sacrificial love that we sometimes

¹ *The Duel* (movie), 1971. Directed by Steven Spielberg, Written by Richard Matheson.

forget, even as we wade into these stories of Scriptures again.

There's a rumor going around that started about 500 years ago. It goes something like this: God is like a cosmic watchmaker. Certainly, God exists! There had to be a God that created all we see, that designed it. But then, this God simply wound up the watch of creation and let it tick. Nothing more needed to be done except an occasional tinkering or simple repair. Otherwise, God could keep his distance and stay more or less removed. It was the age of science. Thinkers like Johannes Kepler and Rene Descartes were discovering and naming laws of the universe that kept the planets spinning around the sun, and kept our feet on the ground, and there was really nothing anyone could do about it. This is how God designed it.

Isaac Newton, as a scientist, said:

The regular motion of the planets makes it reasonable to believe in the continued existence of God.

He seemed to have no problem with God's existence, it made sense. He goes on to say:

*Like a watchmaker, God was forced to intervene in the universe and tinker with the mechanism from time to time to ensure that it continued operating in good working order.*²

Some of this makes sense. But, I want to suggest that most of us would not be here if our experience of faith was a God that merely tinkers with the laws of creation from time to time to keep things in working order. If we began to tell the stories of our lives, as many of us have, and that we need to share regularly, we would hear confirmation of a God who is far more personal than this version of God. We would hear about a God that walks with us through our lives and chases us down when we try to lose him on a lonely backroad of life.

Does anyone know the very last words of the book of John Gospel?

But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the

*world itself could not contain the books that would be written.*³

Would this not also be true of our own church—this church—Faith Presbyterian? Every time I'm with you all, I hear another story of God's loving hand acting among us!

Our Scripture passage is a map of our lives, and the way God is involved in it. But I will be honest. The first couple of times reading through it I found myself thinking, *"Luke, slow down and use a tie your thoughts together. Try a transition or two. Please tell me--what do these four random pieces have to do with each other?"*

First, we have this shocking statement about causing children to stumble as they begin their faith journey. Then we have a comment about what to do if a person claiming to be a disciple is stumbling along in their journey. This is followed by the famous "Faith of a Mustard Seed" parable in verse 6. Finally, an example of a master and a servant and what our attitude of obedience should be at the end of the day. How do they connect?

There is a clue in the very first verse that points to what Jesus is trying to say here:

Occasions for stumbling are bound to come...

One of the themes of our lives is that it ain't gonna be easy. Jesus never promises it will be. In fact, he promises just the opposite when he says, "In this world you will have trouble".⁴

You might say that this passage is a series of warnings about how our faith may be derailed, about how we may totally miss the journey God has intended for us, and that would be a fair place to start as we read through this.

But it would NOT BE FAIR to miss the fact that it also points to a loving God who wants to be lovingly and faithfully involved in our lives from beginning to end.

The passage begins with a shocking statement by Jesus of what is in store for someone who is a stumbling block for a child. Such a dramatic and morbid image. Could Jesus really mean that God

² Dugan, Alexander. *The Fourth Political Theory*. 2012. Pg. 87.

³ John 20:25, NRSV.

⁴ John 16:33.

would allow one of his own children to be drowned as a consequence. No! Of course God would not want that. But Jesus does want to get our attention here. So he uses an exaggeration to be able to say to his listeners: “Never underestimate the importance of the beginning steps of faith for a child. **DO NOT GET IN THE WAY!**” He elevates the weight of those early steps of faith.

I think this is one thing that our church has done fairly well. From our budget, to our time, to the way we fulfill our baptismal vows, to blessing children in worship when they’re born, to the way we celebrate ministry to even the very youngest children in nursery, pre-school, and kindergarten.

I wish every member of our church could sit in on a Godly Play lesson. These are holy moments. There is a reason that you have to be trained to lead these lessons. And it’s not because the lessons or stories are difficult. Teachers are trained so that space can be created for kids’ to be able to enter the story and voice their observations and wonderment about what God is doing. Adults end up learning from 3 years olds because we have raised the level of expectation that God can show up in the lives of those youngest.

This is what Jesus is saying. What comes across as a warning is also a celebration that God’s children are the first heirs of the Kingdom of God. They get to go in first.

A little girl about six years old held her newborn baby brother and said, “Baby brother, what does God sound like? I’m starting to forget.”

Kids know God in a special way that we all should aspire to return to.

Occasions for stumbling are bound to come...but let’s hope that is not one of them! God is involved in our lives and speaking to us from our earliest days. Don’t miss the opportunities.

There are three more that are bound to come at some point in all of our faith journeys though that we find in this passage.

So Jesus says, “**BE ON YOUR GUARD!**” The first one is *disappointment*.

It’s easy to believe at the beginning that living a life for Jesus will be a piece of cake. Here’s the problem: *There are other people involved*. Bummer! And when there are other people involved, you are bound to stumble over people that repeatedly hurt you or others or God in the same way over and over again.

It seems natural that there would eventually be tough love and that a person would not be forgiven, but would be turned away. But tough love has nothing to do with forgiveness. Jesus is challenging our patience here, and saying that if a person is truly sorry we should always forgive. How can that be? We have to.

Why do we have to? Because that is the exactly the way God treats us. It’s exactly the way he has treated his people throughout the entire story. If we ever think the Old Testament isn’t really that necessary anymore, here’s why we have to know it. There is a rhythm in those stories of God’s people turning their backs on God, realizing what they’ve done, and forgiveness. Over and over and over again.

Here is the first clue and reminder that God is not just a watchmaker. God wants us to know this rhythm of sin and grace throughout our lives. And he wants us to extend it to others. We are blessed to be a blessing to others. The prodigal, radical love God runs to us with in the person of Jesus is the kind of love we’re supposed to show to others. Disappointment about relationships in the Kingdom can be a quick stumbling block. Don’t miss the gift it is to be in that kind of relationship (one that’s not perfect) with God.

And then, out of nowhere, with no transition, a disciple yells out, “Increase our faith!” The second stumbling block is **DOUBT**. Doubt comes at the moment when God just doesn’t feel near to us or even real anymore and we don’t know what to do. Those moments when we compare our faith to others and our faith just seems so small.

This short example by Jesus could get lost in this passage or in the entire book, so don’t pass this up. Time and time again, Jesus reminds us that the times when God feels the farthest away are the times when God is the closest.

Jesus begins his longest sermon with this line: *Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of God.* In other words, you should be grateful (blessed) if you feel far from God. That's when you know you are in the Kingdom of God. Why? Because you know better than anyone how much you need God. You can *feel* it!

That's why chooses the very smallest object he can think of and says, "Does your faith feel about this big?" Good. There is power you never knew you had because God is pursuing you. God is with you. Have peace.

Those are the times we should be especially alert, because God wants to show you something amazing. It may be a tree being uprooted, or it may simply be a little sign that says, "See? I'm still here." But we have to be attentive in our times of doubt so we don't miss it. Doubt can turn to great peace because we are starting to ask the hard questions. The right questions.

In this world, you will have trouble. There will be disappointments in people, there will be doubt in God. But in some seasons, we may settle into our faith and experience the most dangerous stumbling block of all — DESERVEDNESS in ourselves.

Now, I had to look this up to make sure it really is a word. And it is. It means, the state of being rightly earned.

And so Jesus uses the example of Master and his servant. To our ears, it almost seems as if Jesus is advocating for poor treatment of servants. But we have to remember, as we learned a couple weeks ago, that a servant at this time would likely have put themselves in the service of their master voluntarily, just as one would apply for a job. These were hired workers who took on great loyalty because they were grateful to their master for the quality of life they provided for them. They would have been well-fed, would have been given comfortable quarters and treated in some ways like part of the family.

So when we look at it from that perspective, the only reason a servant would have to work hard is not because they thought they would get high praise or more money or better food, but because they are already grateful for the opportunity they've

been given and the care they've been given by this family.

If we think in any way that God owes us something because we showed up at church or said our prayers, then this sense of deservedness may be creeping in. I'm willing to bet that in some way it affects us all. When something lucky happens to someone, how many times have we heard, "You must have said your prayers this morning." It's said tongue in cheek, but it hints at deservedness. The truth of the matter is that we don't deserve anything. Our salvation is a gift given by Christ when we deserved it least. Once we realize this, we would fall at Jesus' feet and weep for joy and gratitude, like the woman who anointed him. We not ask for more.

One snowy winter after shoveling many driveways full of snow, I came in the house one day and said, "Dad! Guess what? The neighbors just got a new snowblower! Why don't we get one?"

My dad said, "Why? I've already got one."

Me: "What?! Where?"

Dad: "Yeah, it's called a *Mison Snowblower*. Ever seen one of those?"

Me: "No, but why aren't we using it then?"

Then my dad spoke a little more slowly. A My-Son Snowblower. Then he handed me the shovel for another round.

If my dad had abused my help in any way, I may not have laughed at that. But there is truth wrapped up in his annoying little pun. First of all, I have received so much from my parents, asking me to take part in the work is no problem at all. But second of all, the fact that I am his son means I am part of a family that is a great gift. Like the father to the older son saying, "Look everything I have I have shared with you from the beginning!" The mison snowblower continues to be a joke to this day. I'm happy to shovel anytime I'm nearby. In fact, when I'm home I look for any opportunity I can to help out. I'm grateful.

I don't always treat God that way. I still long to have the faithfully obedient life that reflects in

gratitude the gifts that God has already given to me.

In the end, God is calling us into a life of steady obedience not as a way to earn merit with God, but to say thank you for being involved in my life even at times when I didn't see it. Thank you for your grace. I see now how undeserved it was. I'm still learning the depth of your love.

God longs for us to stop applauding ourselves when we read the bible or spend time in prayer or go to church or serve in a ministry and simply do those things because we want to be in relationship to a God who already loves us regardless.

The song *It Is Well With My Soul* is 150 years old. Some of you know the amazing story of how it came about. There is another song that we've done here that's only 5 years old based on it called simply *It is Well* that I really like. It speaks to a profound peace and maturity of faith that comes, probably after years and years of realizing God is faithful even through the most difficult moments. God continues to pursue us.

*Grander earth has quaked before
Moved by the sound of His voice
Seas that are shaken and stirred
Can be calmed and broken for my regard*

*And through it all, through it all
My eyes are on You
And through it all, through it all
It is well*

*And through it all, through it all
My eyes are on You
And it is well with me'*

There's a confidence in this song that even in the most frightening times, God is there, and the sound of his voice can be heard.

And... that because God has pursued us, our response is to pursue God.

In this world you will have trouble (There will be occasions for stumbling)

This was mentioned by two different High School students as their favorite verse. And it ends like this...

Take heart, I have overcome the world.

God is good!

Amen.

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

The Next Step **A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application**

1. Take another look at Luke 17:1-10. There are bound to be questions about this passage. What are some of yours?
2. There are four short pieces of Jesus' words to us here. Which part impacts you the most? Are there any themes that seem to tie them together?
3. Jesus begins by talking about those who cause the "littlest" ones to sin. Why does he use such a dramatic example?
4. Do you receive the words of verses 2 & 3 more as warning or more as encouragement when you think of our own church family? How do you hear them as regards your own life?
5. Do verses 4 & 5 (about forgiving others) seem to fit in the context of this section of Scripture? What do you see as the connection Jesus is making within this passage?
6. Some might argue that verse 6 is the glue that holds this whole passage together. Do you agree or disagree, and why? How would you define faith based on this verse alone? How would you define it based on the larger story of Scripture?

⁵ *It Is Well*. Bethel Music. 2017.

7. How might the understanding of servanthood/slavery be different in the culture of the early church? How might this affect our reading of verses 7-10?

8. In verse 5, the disciples say to Jesus, "Give us more faith!" For those who have ears to hear him, what steps does Jesus offer for his followers' faith to be strengthened?

TABLE TO TABLE:

What do you think it means to have faith?
What are some ways we can make our faith stronger?